

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 341 891

CG 023 986

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TITLE Counseling Teenage Fathers: The "Maximizing a Life Experience" (MALE) Group. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Personnel Services, Ann Arbor, Mich.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-CG-91-6
PUB DATE 31 Dec 91
CONTRACT RI88062011
NOTE 3p.
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC/CAPS, 2108 School of Education, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Counseling Services; *Early Parenthood; *Fathers; Intervention; Legal Responsibility; Parent Responsibility; Parent Rights; Resources; *School Counseling; Secondary Education; *Secondary School Students
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests; Legal Rights

ABSTRACT

Most teenage fathers care about what happens to their children and need to be given the opportunity to explore their concerns and feelings; however, they do not usually ask for help on their own. The Maximizing a Life Experience (MALE) program focuses on the goals of helping young men to understand their emotional as well as their legal rights and responsibilities as unwed fathers and to learn about available resources. The program, which consists of eight sessions plus a group evaluation, is described, and it is concluded that school counselors must become more active in responding to the silent cries of the forgotten half of the teenage pregnancy problem. (ABL)

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2108 School of Education
The University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-1259

ERIC DIGEST

December 31, 1991

EDO-CG-91-6

Counseling Teenage Fathers The "Maximizing a Life Experience" (MALE) Group

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Introduction

Teenage pregnancy is not new, and many programs have been developed and implemented to address the problem; however, the emphasis has been primarily on the teenage mother and her child. In most instances, teenage pregnancy has been viewed solely as a woman's issue, with the adolescent father regarded as a shadowy, unknown figure—more a culprit than a potential contributor to either the mother or his offspring (Parke, Power, & Fisher, 1980).

School and agency counselors must continue to offer programs to support young mothers and their children, but this forgotten half of the teenage pregnancy problem cannot continue to be overlooked. Recently, the plight of the unwed, teenage father has begun to gain attention (Robinson & Barret, 1985; Stengel, 1985). Why has it taken so long to recognize the needs of the teenage father? Young men in American society generally are expected to have it all together or to pretend that they do. Too often, unwed teenage fathers have been stereotyped as callous, "macho studs" who are interested only in their own pleasure. Because of these stereotypes, counselors, educators, and others did not believe that the young men recognized their need for help or that they would participate in programs designed to assist them. Studies now show that most teenage fathers do not have it all together and are just as confused, afraid, and anxious as the young women they impregnate (Jensen, 1979; Robinson & Barret, 1985).

The "Maximizing a Life Experience" (MALE) Group

Most teenage fathers care about what happens to their children (Barret & Robinson, 1981; Earls & Siegel, 1980; Parke, Power, & Fisher, 1980; Stengel, 1985) and need to be given the opportunity to explore their concerns and feelings; however, they do not usually ask for help on their own (Coleman, 1981). Little has been reported in the literature about the counselor's role in providing support for unwed fathers. Articles on teenage pregnancy occasionally will include a paragraph suggesting that the young man also should be helped, but specific programs designed to assist the adolescent father are still relatively rare (Foster & Miller, 1980; Stengel, 1985; Wagner, 1980). This digest describes a group counseling program that was developed to provide support and assistance for unwed teenage fathers in the school.

Program Rationale and Objectives

The Maximizing a Life Experience (MALE) program was developed to focus on a different set of the three Rs: Rights, Responsibilities, and Resources. The general goals were to help the young men understand their emotional rights (to express feelings and

concerns and receive emotional support) and responsibilities, as well as their legal rights and responsibilities, and to learn about available resources. The specific objectives for the program were to help the teenage fathers:

- Learn more about themselves and better understand their feelings about their present situation.
- Understand their legal and emotional rights and responsibilities.
- Recognize that pregnancy cannot be dismissed as an accident.
- Obtain factual information about reproductive biology, contraception, and sexually transmitted diseases.
- Identify and explore their present and future options.
- Learn how to solve problems and make sound decisions.
- Realize what resources are available and how to use them.

The MALE Group

The eight group participants were enrolled in a suburban high school with a student population that was primarily Black and from lower socioeconomic levels. The young men, two of whom were expectant fathers, were between 15 and 18 years old and had academic averages that ranged from a B to a D. About half of them hoped to continue their education after high school graduation. The average age of first sexual activity was 12, which is consistent with reported data for Black men (Earls & Siegel, 1980). Two of the young men still dated the mothers of their children; they all maintained regular contact with their children.

The MALE group met once a week for 8 weeks in 1-hour sessions during the school day and took one 3-hour field trip on a teacher workday. The meetings were scheduled on a rotating basis so that group members did not miss the same class more than twice. They were required to obtain assignments ahead of time and to keep up in their course work.

Sessions 1-9

The first session included four primary tasks: program overview and logistical information, a get-acquainted activity, setting group and individual goals, and development of ground rules.

The second session began with a film, *Teenage Father* (Hackford, 1978), which followed a teenage couple from the time they learned that the girl was pregnant until a decision was reached as to what action to take. Filmed from the young man's perspective, it served as an excellent stimulus for discussion of values and attitudes regarding teenage sexual activity.

The third session also began with an audiovisual presentation. Titled *His Baby Too: Problems of Teenage Pregnancy*, the

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filmstrip "defines and highlights the role of the unwed father, and stresses the importance of his active role in solving the problems of an unplanned pregnancy" (Vanderslice, 1980, p. 4). Discussion questions, suggested activities, and a bibliography, combined with the audiovisual presentation, made this an excellent resource and stimulated further discussion of options available to the teenage father or prospective teenage father.

Learning the legal rights and responsibilities of unwed teenage fathers was one of the primary reasons some of the members joined the group. An attorney from the Legal Aid Society was provided with a copy of the group's questions before the fourth session and came prepared to respond to those and any additional questions.

The fifth and sixth sessions were designed to provide information on reproductive biology, contraception, and sexually transmitted diseases. In Session 5, a speaker from Planned Parenthood presented basic information on reproductive processes and contraception. Session 6 was a field trip to a Planned Parenthood center, where a staff member reviewed information on reproduction and contraception and presented information on sexually transmitted diseases. The young men were then given a tour of the center. Services available for their sexual partners were also discussed.

Phipps-Yonas (1980) reported that teenagers who use contraception effectively seem to be better problem solvers. The seventh session was designed, therefore, to teach effective problem-solving and decision-making models and to give group members the opportunity to use their new skills in simulated situations.

In the eighth session each member was given an opportunity to use the group resources and his new skills in selecting and working through a personal problem related to being a teenage father. Throughout these sessions, it was emphasized to the adolescent fathers that what they did and what they became depended on their own concerted efforts.

The ninth session included three primary tasks: reviewing and summarizing the group experience, providing information about the availability of resources and completing a group evaluation and posttest.

Program Evaluation and Follow-Up

On a 10-point scale, with 10 being the most favorable rating, the members gave the group experience an overall rating of 9.5. Group members also answered questions on what they liked best about the group, what they would change, and what was the most important thing they learned. Their responses indicated that they liked the supportive atmosphere and a chance to discuss their situations with others who had similar problems. Most of them had not been aware that they shared the unwed father role before joining the group. The most commonly suggested change was to have longer and more frequent sessions.

Changes also were noted on several posttest items. For example, seven members reported that they: (a) now consider the possibility of pregnancy before having sexual relations and (b) would now consider abortion as an option, compared with five positive responses to these two items on the pretest. All eight group members agreed that the man should share contraceptive responsibility, compared with four on the pretest; and, seven members reported that they now used contraceptives consistently, compared with three on the pretest.

In a follow-up of the eight group members one year later, four were in college or technical school, two were in the military, and two were still in high school. None were married or had a second child, and all were continuing to contribute toward the support of their first child. The only change in the follow-up two years later was that one young man had dropped out of college, and one had graduated from high school. Both of them were working full time.

Conclusion and Implications

The experience of fatherhood is a life-changing event. School counselors must overcome the prevalent myths about teenage fathers and assume a more equitable position in providing services for these young men. They need help in understanding their feelings, their legal and emotional rights and responsibilities, their alternatives, and the possible consequences of these choices.

The MALE group program was an attempt to provide unwed teenage fathers with knowledge, resources, care, support, and counsel so that they could cope more effectively with their quickly changing lives and become productive citizens who could compete successfully with their peers.

Becoming a father during adolescence has serious consequences for individual development, and teenage fathers are not psychologically prepared for their new role. School counselors must become more active in responding to the silent cries of the forgotten half of the teenage pregnancy problem.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education under contract number R188062011. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.